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New HIV Fear in Russia --- Researchers See Signs That Sexual Transmission Of AIDS Virus Could Surge

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BARCELONA, Spain -- New statistics from Russia suggest that the skyrocketing rate of HIV infection among drug users may be slowing, but research presented at an AIDS conference here suggests that an epidemic of sexually transmitted infections may be looming.

Russia is a major focus of attention and fear because the annual number of new infections with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, soared from 1996 to 2001. Meteoric increases aren't uncommon in HIV epidemics among intravenous drug users, because sharing used syringes is a much more efficient method of transmitting the virus than sexual intercourse. As many as 90% of Russia's infections appear to be caused through intravenous drug use, which rose amid social dislocation caused by the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

New data from the federal AIDS center in Moscow through July 1 show that the annualized number of registered new HIV infections has fallen from 87,000 last year to about 42,000. If this trend continues, it could indicate that the spread of HIV in the country is slowing. But it might also mean that the Russian HIV surveillance system isn't looking at the population into which the virus is spreading.

That is why researchers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Russian Association for STI Prevention looked at homeless shelters in Moscow, where people picked up off the streets are detained for a week.

Among 400 homeless women studied, the HIV rate is still less than 3%, but the number engaging in risky behavior is high. Forty-five percent of the women under 18-years old and 54% of the adult women exchanged sex for drugs or money. Among the women who exchanged sex, more than 38% tested positive for syphilis, and 29% had genital herpes.

Because these sexually transmitted diseases are spread in the same way as HIV, they suggest that HIV is likely to spread in this group. Furthermore, such diseases work biologically to increase the odds that a person will either acquire or transmit HIV.

These factors, and the fact that the women are selling sex, "are worrisome for the potential of HIV spread," the authors concluded.

Indeed, many homeless women look for sex clients at Komsomolskaya Ploshchad in Moscow, a square famous for its three train stations. "If you think about how central Moscow is and how the trains go everywhere," then it is easy to see how the virus could spread, said Sevgi Aral, another CDC researcher who has studied homeless women in Moscow.

Journal Link: See complete coverage of the International AIDS Conference in the new Health Industry Edition in the Online Journal at WSJ.com/health.

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